



No. 10c: Reaching out to the wider community - Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Community

Introduction

Britain today is an increasingly pluralistic and diverse society. One of the problems this creates is that it is no longer possible to say (if in fact it ever was!) what it is that defines British culture and our traditional understanding of how we sit in the world has had to change to reflect the values and concerns of minority groups now residing amongst us. While it could be argued that this cultural diversity is precisely what now defines British culture, one of the downsides is that the lack of a common culture could result in a rather fractured and polarised community.

Many civic societies operate in areas which include black and minority ethnic groups yet the typical membership of an average society is unlikely to reflect this cultural diversity unless societies take practical steps to reach out to members of such minority groups. Of course, tapping into BME groups could also prove a useful source of new members and skills for civic societies.

The challenge today

It is important that civic societies rise to the challenge if they are to be truly representative of the wider community. Members of BME groups may often be isolated within the wider community, being subject to greater levels of poverty, social deprivation, discrimination and exclusion. If they have recently taken up residence in this country, they may well lack social and family networks. People who live in poor neighbourhoods may feel that there is no opportunity for them to improve their environment.

Interaction with members of BME groups will help societies to understand the particular concerns of ethnic and cultural minorities. Societies can play a useful brokering role between minority communities and other parts of the wider community in helping to facilitate a dialogue and to instigate campaigns or other action to engage people in improving or safeguarding their local environment. In doing so, societies will stand a better chance of ensuring ongoing community ownership of renewal initiatives. It is essential that societies understand the local context and strongly recommended that some research is done before embarking on any of the suggestions overleaf.

There will, no doubt, be some nervousness about making contact with other cultural groups whose beliefs and values are different. However, it is important to set aside such reservations if any progress is to be made although societies may wish to avail themselves of advice and support from established reach out organisations and local networks that may well exist where minority ethnic groups are established.

Sometimes language problems may mean that societies need to think about their communication strategies in new ways. Remember that English may not be the first language of some people who have recently settled in this country. Interpretation

services may be necessary. Advice on the use of interpreters (and where to find them) will sometimes be available through your local authority or from other charities and organisations that already have links with BME community members.

The pointers given overleaf are only intended to stimulate discussion and to encourage you to take actions that will help your society make contact with members of the community that you might not otherwise have considered. It is clear that there is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution to offer here as each community will have its own issues of social integration to address.

Challenge

Suggested steps to take/points to consider

i. Do you know the ethnic mix of your community?

Do not assume that your area does not have a minority ethnic population. Just because people you see on the street look as if they are mono-cultural does not mean that they are.

Local census figures will give a break down of the population within your area that might reveal some surprising results. Neighbourhood statistics can also show the ethnic mix within your community. These figures are available from the Office for National Statistics (see website address below).

ii. Where your area does have BME representation, do you specifically target people from minority groups in your membership campaigns and other activities?

Members of black and minority ethnic groups are likely to need some encouragement to get involved with your society, particularly if they see the existing membership as exclusively (or primarily) 'white, middle class and retired'. You will need to consider some practical steps to provide this encouragement. For example, you could do leaflet drops in streets where members of minority groups are known to live. It may be helpful to provide literature in a range of languages, although you should make clear what facilities are available if non-English speakers do approach you to avoid raising expectations that you cannot meet.

How welcoming is your society to new members, particularly from BME groups?

How able is your society to deal with enquiries raised by members of BME groups?

Also, consider visiting community centres and setting up displays and exhibitions about your society. Libraries may be another useful outlet for your literature. Make contact with churches and mosques used by minority groups.

Have you explored the cultural histories of BME groups in your area? Can you help people from BME communities to interpret their own heritage through the history of the built environment within your area?

Consider providing talks and guided walks to members of minority groups where an interpreter is available to help people whose first language is not English.

iii. Do you run consultations with members of the BME communities within your area? Members of BME groups may have special problems that will need a different response from local agencies, developers and planners. While some organisations may already have established links with BME communities, others will not. Civic societies should be able to call on information and advice to help developers and others engage with minority groups so that consultation is possible on environment issues.

Consider running surveys in different languages.

iv. Do you encourage members of BME communities to take an interest in the built environment and other matters? Regeneration and renewal initiatives are more likely to succeed if all local people are involved. Given that many members of ethnic minorities will live in wards that might well be run down and in need of improvement, your society could play a very active and useful role in bringing people together, providing information, skills training and opportunities for networking to foster and interest in the local environment.

Consider running some planning workshops for local communities to discuss how they would like to see their area improved. Use the information gleaned from such activities to inform the strategy for your own society so that you can provide practical support to helping local people make a difference.

v. Does your society promote an interest in the cultural traditions and heritage of BME groups within your area? Where possible, aim for cross-cultural contacts within the activities organised by your society to help breakdown cross-cultural barriers that might exist between communities.

Research the history of immigration within your area and consider organising exhibitions or other activities to promote an awareness of the story.

Consider including buildings with a link to BME groups, such as mosques and synagogues, in Heritage Open Days events.

Other points to consider

To reach out successfully to members of BME communities, societies will need to develop their own cultural awareness and ensure they respect cultural sensitivities. For example, faith groups will observe religious festivals and you will need to take account of these to avoid a clash that would preclude participation in your event. If you are providing refreshments at an event, be alert to any special dietary requirements of members of minority ethnic or faith groups. Also be alert to the role of women may differ from one minority group to another.

Racial discrimination is specifically proscribed in law.

Funding may be available for projects specifically aimed at improving social cohesiveness through community building. The Home Office's Community Cohesion Unit has produced advice for organisations designing, developing and delivering Area Based Initiatives to build community cohesion. While this is aimed particularly at government and local authority agencies and partners, it is a useful source of ideas and advice that civic societies may wish to consider. The report can be downloaded from their website at the address below.

For more information, try the following websites:

Commission for Racial Equality	www.cre.gov.uk
Neighbourhood Renewal Unit	www.neighbourhoodrenewal.gov.uk
Neighbourhood Statistics	www.neighbourhoodstatistics.gov.uk
The Inter Faith Network for the UK	www.intrfaith.org.uk
Community Cohesion Unit	www.communitycohesion.gov.uk